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ABSTRACT

Leave-taking behavior of 84 pre-school children (44 female, 40 male) and their parents during separation at the beginning of a pre-school experience was studied. Super-8mm motion picture film was analyzed on a hand operated movie editor allowing a precise record of the segments of behavior to be made. Three factors emerged from the analysis: (1) the pre-school teacher facilitates parent-child separation, (2) warm parent-child affiliative behavior encourages mutually initiated separation, (3) reluctance of the child to separate from a rejecting parent who does not respond with affiliative behavior. Traditional mother-infant attachment theory has limited utility for interpreting the findings. For the majority of the children transition from parent to pre-school was made easily. (Author)

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PARENT--PRE-SCHOOLER SEPARATION BEHAVIOR AND ATTACHMENT THEORY

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This study applies an ethological approach to the issue of parent-child separation, and examines in detail the non-verbal, leave-taking behavior of parents and children during separation at the beginning of a pre-school experience. One of the most common, and socially sanctioned moments of parent-child separation occurs when the child is brought to a pre-school for the first time. Going to nursery school, or pre-school at age three or four marks the official beginning of the movement out of the home environment into society for many children. In light of child psychology's long standing interest in parent-child attachment, and the very common, if not universal, practice of separating children from parents for a pre-school experience, studying the non-verbal behavior involved in parent pre-schooler separation promises to illuminate both the nature of parent-child attachment, and the utility of applying ethological techniques to the issues of human development.

Parent-child attachment, and the subsequent anxieties aroused when the attachment bond is broken due to separation, have received considerable research attention in recent years. Separation has been a means of studying mother-infant attachment (Ainsworth, 1973). Several research reports and

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theoretical papers have addressed themselves to pre-school separation. Cross (1970), Speers (1971), Pine (1971), and in a more global context, Bowlby (1973) have dealt with the theoretical issue of separation while Furman (1966), Kessler (1969), Blurton Jones & Leach (1972), and Fassler (1974) have discussed the actual behavior and experience of separation, and dealing with that experience in a pre-school setting. Most studies have concentrated primarily on the effects of interrupting the parent-child relationship and have avoided (with the notable exception of Blurton Jones & Leach, 1972) observing and studying specific behavioral elements in the actual process of separation.

Blurton Jones & Leach (1972) have criticized psychologists for writing as if there were a real entity called "attachment" arguing from an ethological perspective that a concept like parent-child attachment can be justified only as a "short hand" for behaviors that occur together in constellations and are related to each other, during parent-child interaction. McGrew (1972) has noted that several researchers have discussed extending ethological findings and methods to the domain of human social behavior, but that few empirical investigations that employ an ethological framework have been carried out. The present study has applied both an ethological "attitude" and method to the study of parent-child separation. By studying the actual behaviors of child and parent, when the parent-child relationship is put under the strain of separation, key elements of the relationship and the role of the pre-school teacher in helping the child make the adjustment to the school setting have been revealed.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were eighty-four normal pre-school children, (44 female, 40 male), one parent for each child, four supervising teachers and four assistant teachers. All the children attended the Child Development Center, or the Child Development Laboratories, located on the Utah State University campus in Logan, Utah. Children's ages ranged from 3.5 to 5.5 years, mean age 4.4 years. Subjects were predominantly middle-class Caucasians from the University community. A teacher was present in sixty-five percent of the parent-child leave-taking episodes.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the first week of the pre-school program (Monday-Thursday). Motion pictures were made using a Kodak XL-55 Super 8mm movie camera, set on a tripod. This camera exposes film at the rate of 18 frames per second. High speed Ektachrome film, which allows indoor movies without movie lights, was used. At the Child Development Center, the camera was located indoors, directly across from the entrance. Subjects were filmed as they entered and departed. At the Child Development Labs, the camera was located outside and subjects were filmed as they went through their leave-taking procedures at the entrance gate of the labs.

It is not possible to determine exactly how, or to what extent the investigator's influence affected the subjects' behavior. No direct explanation was given as to the nature or purpose of the filming until the project was completed. However, at registration for the Pre-school, it is explained

that filming and videotaping are a part of on-going Research projects, and children and parents quickly become desensitized to the presence of observers.

Direct observation and scoring of non-verbal behavior in vivo (as employed by Blurton Jones & Leach, 1972, for example) can be unreliable, and allows data analysis only on a macro level, because the mechanism for recording the data (a person) records at speeds similar to those at which data are produced by the subjects. Use of film as the medium of data collection has the advantage of allowing repeated, back-and-forth viewing of the behavior at any desirable speed; high inter-rater reliability can be obtained, and a micro-level of analysis that is not possible with direct observation techniques can be obtained.

Data Analysis

The film was viewed on a hand-operated, "Bentar Dual-8" movie editor that allowed repeated back and forth viewing of precise segments of behavior frame-by-frame or several frames in sequence.

A behavioral check list was devised to count fourteen items of child behavior, fourteen items of parent behavior, and eight items of teacher behavior for the periods of leave-taking. The behavior items and their definitions are listed in the Appendix. The list of items was devised from a pilot film, and from conjecture about elements of leave-taking behavior the investigators thought might occur during parent-child separation. Teachers were always female; sex of a child and parent were recorded though factor analysis revealed that neither sex of parent nor sex of child contributed significantly to the interaction. Data from the check lists were transferred onto computer cards for the factor analysis. Inter-rater reliability was 98% on both frequency and category of behaviors.

RESULTS

Percentage and Frequency of Behaviors

Table 1 lists the frequency of each behavior for child, parent, and teacher; the number of individuals that exhibited each behavior; and the percentage of each subject group that displayed the behavior.

The most frequently displayed child behaviors were: 1) gaze at teacher (78 times), 2) flat affect (71 times), 3) gaze at parent (54 times), and 4) touch (54 times). The same behaviors were displayed by the largest

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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percentage of the child sample: 1) flat effect (85%), 2) gaze at teacher (61%), 3) touch (50%), and 4) gaze at parent (40%).

The most frequent parent behaviors were: 1) gaze at child (195 times), 2) touch child (104 times), and 3) gaze at teacher (103 times). These behavior items were also displayed by the largest percentage of the parent sample: 1) gaze at child (88%), 2) touch (70%), and 3) gaze at teacher (63%).

The teacher behavior items most frequently displayed were: 1) gaze at child (98 times), and 2) gaze at parent (82 times). The behaviors displayed by the largest percentages of teachers were: 1) gaze at child (87%), 2) gaze at parent (76%), 3) talk (56%), 4) approach child (56%), and 5) approach parent (55%).

Gazing (child at parent and teacher, parent at child and teacher, teacher at child and parent) appeared most frequently and was also displayed by the largest percentage of each subject type. Gazing is the central activity around which the leave-taking process unfolds. Another frequent and

important parting activity is touch between parent and child. The majority of the children displayed flat affect, which was an expressionless (neither positive or negative) look on their faces throughout the leave-taking episode.

Factor Analysis

In order to determine inter-relationships among items, a factor analysis was run on the data. The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 2. Three important factors emerge from this analysis.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Factor 1

Factor 1 accounted for 15.1 percent of the total variance. The items with the highest loadings for child behavior were; 1) gaze at teacher (.769), 2) initiate away (.678), and 3) touch (.405).

The highest loading items for parent behavior were: 1) gaze back (.739), 2) approach teacher (.438), 3) gaze at teacher (.433), and 4) smile at teacher (.399).

The teacher behavior items with the highest loadings were: 1) gaze at child (.803), 2) gaze at parent (.744), 3) talk (.642), 4) smile at parent (.611), 5) approach parent (.593), and 6) smile at child (.484).

The teacher is a vital part in this pattern and very much involved in the parent-child interaction. The child looks primarily at the teacher, touches the parent and initiates the separation. The parent looks back at the child as he leaves, but the majority of his activities are directed

toward the teacher; the parent approaches, smiles at, and looks at the teacher. The teacher is concerned with both parent and child; she gazes primarily at the child, looks at the parent and talks to both, but she smiles at the parent more often and approaches the parent more than she does the child.

Factor 2

Factor 2 accounted for 9.3 percent of the total variance. The highest loading items for child behavior were: 1) kiss (.524), 2) back to parent (.484) and 3) hug (.410). The parent behavior items with the highest 39 loadings were: 1) greet teacher (.536), 2) gaze at teacher (.507), 3) kiss (.500), 4) groom (.457), 5) touch (.454), and 6) approach child (.412). There were no teacher behavior items with high loadings.

Here both child and parent engage in tactile behavior. There is an exchange of parent-child affection, or affiliation, with minimal teacher involvement in the interaction. The child's behavior is directed toward the parent. The parent does greet and look at the teacher, which is reciprocated by an approach by the teacher, but most of the parent behavior is child-oriented. Neither child nor parent initiates the away movement, which indicates a mutually initiated separation from each other.

Factor 3

Factor 3 accounted for 6.9 percent of the total variance. The child behavior items of highest loadings were: 1) cling (-.772), 2) touch (-.460), and 3) face (-.454). The parent behavior items of highest loadings were: 1) gaze at child (-.523), and 2) initiate away (.496). The teacher behavior item with the highest loading was: 1) approach the child (.517).

Here there is an indication of reluctance on the part of the child to

leave the parent as he clings, touches, faces, and hugs the parent. In response, the parent looks at the child, but initiates the away movement. The teacher moves toward the child. Apparently in an effort to alleviate anxiety and facilitate separation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm the utility of an ethological approach in child development research. Three patterns of leave-taking behavior were identified: 1) the teacher acts as a mediator between the child and the parent in their separation process, 2) parent-child affiliative behavior with mutually initiated separation, and 3) reluctance of the child to separate from the parent, the child clings in an insecure and dependent manner, the parent does not respond with affiliative behavior and initiates the separation.

The parent-child-teacher triad pattern (Factor 1) was the most commonly observed leave-taking procedure and indicates the importance of the pre-school teacher in the separation ritual. The teacher seems to reassure both child and parent by smiling, gazing, and talking to both. The importance of the teacher's presence lies as much in her interaction with the parent as with the child. Teacher and parent approach and smile at each other, look at each other and at the child. Through this interaction, the teacher assures the parent that this child will be taken care of after he leaves; witnessing this exchange, the child is also given assurance. The child is the first to move away from the parent. However, the teacher encourages separation; by gazing, smiling, and at times talking to the child, she turns the child's attention to the pre-school activities. As the parent leaves, he gazes back at the child probably for reassurance that the child is all right.

The second factor reveals a pattern of parent-child affiliation. There is reciprocal tactile behavior between child and parent. Touch in this context might be interpreted as encouragement, or an expression of tenderness, and emotional support. The parent approaches, grooms, touches, and kisses the child while the child reciprocates with hugs and kisses. Parent greets and looks at the teacher indicating an acceptance of her presence, and possibly acknowledging that he is entering her territory: the pre-school. Neither the child nor the parent makes the initial separation movement but the separation is simultaneous. The child's turning his back to his parent is nonrejecting but is an independence type of behavior parallel to what Ainsworth (1973) labeled "secure-attached" behavior of children who can move away from their responsive mothers to explore unfamiliar surroundings.

The third type of leave-taking pattern was not seen as a common separation episode in this investigation. The child is visibly insecure and dependent on the parent as he clings, touches, and faces his parent. This proximity-seeking, contact-maintaining behavior is very similar to behavior displayed by infants after brief periods of mother separation (Ainsworth, 1973). The teacher approaches the child as a means of greeting, comforting, and probably to offer herself as a parent substitute. The parent iniates the separation, and seems rejecting, insensitive and inaccessable. In several of these cases the observers made a clinical judgment that the parent was anxious to leave and was making a "get away."

Crying was not included on the list of behavior items on the scoring sheet due to the absence of this behavior. When studying separation behavior of mothers and children, Blurton Jones & Leach (1972) found crying and puckering to be common among their young children and correlated with maternal approach at greeting. The difference between their results and

ours is probably because Blurton Jones & Leach deliberately sought crying as a separation behavior, and therefore chose younger children (age 2 years). The age of the oldest crier they found was 3 years. The average age of the children in this study was 4.4 years.

Present Findings in the Context of Attachment Theory

Traditionally, attachment has been seen as an affectional tie between two people. Most research, and therefore most hard data relating to attachment has been produced by mother-infant dyads. The behavioral manifestations of the affectional tie have been described as proximity- and contact-promoting, especially when one individual (an infant) seeks to avoid separation from another (a mother).

The behaviors exibited most frequently and by the highest percentage of children (flat affect, gaze at teacher, touch, and gaze at parent); and the factor which included these behaviors, (Factor 1) and accounted for the highest percentage of the variance in our study, do not support traditional concepts about parent-child attachment, as measured by contact- and proximity-seeking behavior. Flat affect is clearly not contact- or proximity-seeking behavior. Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton (1971) have described infant behavior similar to our flat affect category in which infants ignored or turned away from mothers during reunion after brief separation. These infants were seen as representing deviant mother-infant relationships, however. Gazing behavior is looked upon with mistrust as an attachment behavior in infants because of their tendancy to prefer novel to familiar visual stimuli, (Ainsworth, 1973) and because infants look away from their mothers more than they look at them (Peery & Stern, 1975).

Factor 2 with high parent-child affiliation and mutual separation is parallel to what Ainsworth calls "secure attached" behavior. According

to Ainsworth (1973) when warm affiliative ties are developed between mother and infant, the infant will freely move out into unfamiliar territory, returning frequently to the mother as a "secure base" of operation. As the infant matures the periods of comfortable separation become longer. In Factor 2 we see affiliative attachment behavior between parent and child, and a willingness on the part of both child and parent for separation, leaving the child in new surroundings. Thus Factor 2 can be seen as the logical maturation of the pattern between mothers and infants described by Ainsworth, only the comfortable duration of the separation at age 4.4 years is measured in hours instead of minutes.

Factor 3 presents the pattern of an insensitive, rejecting parent, and a child displaying attachment behavior--to be sure--but attachment behavior more typical of a younger child or infant. Blurton Jones & Leach (1972) found a higher frequency of crying and clinging with younger children, while Ainsworth (1973) reports that crying and clinging are common infant attachment behaviors. It is tempting to speculate that an insensitive, rejecting parent may retard his child's emotional development by fostering high anxiety in the child about his security. The child then remains over concerned about maintaining proximity to the parent because his infantile needs for parental assurance have not been met. However, our data neither confirm nor disprove such speculation.

In summary, the concept of attachment as an affectional tie between two people is a viable notion for thinking about our findings. However, measuring attachment in terms of proximity-seeking and contact-maintaining behaviors is of limited utility for the present study. Our data suggest a need to modify our theories about relationships between parents and children. We assume that there are affectional ties between the parents and children, but

these ties may not be the most salient variable for their interaction. The children in this study have matured beyond the point of needing to cling to parents. The need to express the affective relationship is not so urgent as in younger children; the expression is more mature and subtile, or is absent in the leave-taking situation. This suggests that attachment theory as defined in a traditional manner may have little utility for behavioral analyses with older children. Early interactions with parents pave the way for more mature, and different patterns of behavior as the child moves out of the world of parents, and into the world of teachers and peers.

Implications About the Pre-school Setting

It was intriguing that teachers played such an important role in Factor 1. We have discussed elsewhere (Peery, 1975) the implications of our findings for the pre-school teacher in facilitating separation of parent and child. The ease with which the children transferred from parents to pre-school may be interpreted, in part, as a function of the availability of another adult (teacher, acting as parent surrogate). This adult teacher is willing to interact with parents (via gazing, approaching and talking), thus eleviating possible parental anxiety; and to interact with and pay attention to children (especially via gazing) thus eleviating possible anxiety in the children.

Perhaps because we were influenced by traditions about anxieties aroused when children are separated from their parents, we were expecting to find more attachment-type behaviors. For the majority of the children in this study, however, the transition from parent to pre-school was very easy to make and required little affective involvement. These pre-school subjects seemed ready and able to move into the novel social setting that pre-school offers.

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Table 1. Frequency of behavior occurrence, number of individuals and percentage of each subject-type that exhibited the behavior (C= Child, P= Parent, T= Teacher).

Subjects	Behavior	Frequency	No. of Ind.	Percentage of Sample
Children	wave	4	3	4
	smile	4	4	5
	kiss	15	14	17
	cling	2	2	2
	touch	54	42	50
	face	12	10	12
	hug	5	5	6
	gaze P	54	33	40
	gaze T	78	51	61
	gaze back	33	25	30
	flat affect	71	71	85
	back to P	30	26	31
	approach P	33	29	35
	initiate away	38	38	45
Parents	approach C	15	15	18
	approach T	24	24	29
	wave	15	11	13
	smile C	7	6	7
	smile T	9	9	11
	kiss	20	20	24
	touch	104	59	70
	groom	17	14	17
	hug	12	8	10
	gaze C	195	74	88
	gaze T	103	53	63
	gaze back	50	36	43
	greet T	35	35	42
	initiate away	41	41	49
Teachers	approach C	31	31	56
	approach P	30	30	55
	smile C	7	6	11
	smile P	7	7	12
	touch	26	22	40
	gaze C	98	48	87
	gaze P	82	42	76
	talk	31	31	56

Table 2. Results of factor analysis of behavior items of children, parents, and teachers.

Factor		1	2	3
% of variance		15.100	9.313	6.913
Child Behavior	wave	.006	.256	.071
	smile	.256	.208	.035
	kiss	-.070	.524*	-.086
	cling	.196	-.087	-.772*
	touch P	.405	-.103	-.460*
	face	.245	.322	-.454*
	hug	.132	.410*	-.345
	gaze P	.023	.486*	.016
	gaze T	.769*	.151	.025
	gaze back	-.080	.029	-.019
	flat affect	-.063	.371	-.150
	back to P	-.018	.484*	.055
	approach P	.207	.097	.225
	initiate away	.678*	-.279	.074
	sex of C	.266	-.089	-.234
Parent Behavior	approach C	-.060	.412*	.068
	approach T	.438*	-.253	-.131
	wave	-.041	.206	.086
	smile C	.154	.247	.198
	smile T	.399	.268	.352
	kiss	-.180	.500*	-.056
	touch C	.207	.454*	-.368
	groom	.145	.457*	-.151
	hug	-.053	.303*	-.175
	gaze C	.083	-.196	-.523*
	gaze T	.433*	.507*	.150
	gaze back	.739*	.044	.027
	greet T	.218	.536*	.179
	initiate away	-.024	-.133	.496*
	sex of P	.035	-.117	-.153
Teacher Behavior	approach C	-.030	.139	-.517*
	approach P	.593*	-.366	-.165
	smile C	.484*	.263	.204
	smile P	.611*	.188	.227
	touch C	.203	-.217	-.015
	gaze C	.803*	-.077	-.042
	gaze P	.774*	.035	.124
	talk	.642*	-.229	.159

*Highest loading items, with the cut-off point at ± .400.

APPENDIX

Child Behavior

Wave--raising the hand, or hand and arm up and down in a rapid flapping motion.

Smile--lips draw back corners of the mouth turn up, teeth may or may not be exposed.

Kiss--child's lips pucker and touch part of the parent's body briefly.

Cling--the child grasps the parent (hand, leg, clothing) with one or both hands, or hands and arms. Holding hands with the parent during approach and entrance of pre-school is not scored as a cling unless the child maintains the grasp after the entrance has been completed.

Touch P--some part of the childs body touches the parent or his clothing.

Face--the child turns his face so that his nose is pointing toward the parent. The child's body is also oriented so that his nose is directly over the center of his chest.

Hug--the child grasps the parents legs or neck with his arms and releases immediately. Distinguished from a cling by its short duration.

Gaze P--the child's gaze is directed toward the parent. Because of head turning and eye movement gaze direction need not be accompanied by a face.

Gaze T--child's gaze direction is toward the teacher.

Gaze Back--after the child has changed his facing orientation away from the parent and broken gaze contact, his gaze returns to the parent either by head turning, or head and body turning.

Flat Affect--the child's facial expression is neutral, he neither frowns

and grimaces nor smiles. It is impossible to infer his emotional state from his neutral facial expression.

Back to P--the child turns his back to the parent.

Approach P--the child steps toward the parent.

Initiate Away--the first steps of separation are taken by the child. He is the first to increase the physical distance between parent and child.

Parent Behavior

Approach C--same (Where the behavior is the same as the child's behavioral definition only performed by the parent, the word same will be used.)

Approach T--same

Wave--same

Smile C--same

Smile T--same

Kiss--same

Touch--same

Groom--several kinds of parental behavior are lumped into this category. They include behaviors where the parent was trying to improve the appearance of the child. For example: hair straightening, collar straightening, shirt buttoning, shirt-tail tucking in, lint picking, brushing off, etc.

Hug--same

Gaze C--same

Gaze T--same

Gaze Back--same

Greet T--a cluster of parental behavior directed toward the teacher including:

head toss, eyebrows up, eyes opening, mouth opening. smile, and usually some verbalization.

Initiate Away--same

Teacher Behavior

Approach C--same

Approach P--same

Smile C--same

Smile P--same

Touch--teacher touches child.

Gaze C--same

Gaze P--same

Talk--the teacher is verbalizing. Since sound film was not used it was difficult to tell exactly to whom the teacher was talking. Teacher talking occured most frequently as part of the parental greeting behavior exhibited by the teacher.